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WHAT ENGLISH POETRY OWES TO YOUNG PEOPLE.

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BEFORE leaving their teens some lads have written that which the world has not yet let die. At the age when most boys are learning to swing the bat, or to cut a pigeon's wing on the ice, Henry Kirke White was writing some of the best hymns that are sung in the churches, and Keats was proving that he had few peers among those who have written the English language, and Chatterton was hoaxing grave professors and acute *literati* with his old-fashioned verses.

At the age when most young men are learning how to fall in love and how to fall out again with celerity and despatch, Shelley was entrancing the world with his wonderful verses, and Pollok was discoursing in Calvinistic diction on the "Course of Time" and wrestling with theology and metaphysics in poetic guise, and George Farquhar was convulsing the English public with his comedies. I will confine myself to the impression made upon literature by young people who have died before completing their twenty-fifth year. Should a very few more years be added to this limit, I should be able to add many other distinguished names to this list of literary young people, such as Shelley and Pollok already mentioned, for the former died when he was thirty, and the latter was but twenty-eight when he finished his "Course of Time."

Charles Wolfe was but thirty-two when he died and only twenty-eight when he wrote the dirge familiar to every schoolboy, "The Burial of Sir John Moore." Christopher Marlowe, who has been called "the greatest of Shakespeare's precursors in the drama," was only twenty-nine when he penned his last distich; while

Francis Beaumont, one of the greatest dramatists who followed the "myriad-minded" bard of Stratford, was but thirty when he breathed his last.

But to mention the contributions to literature of those who died in their early youth is my intention in this article, and the name of Thomas Chatterton naturally comes first to mind, for he was one of the most famous as well as the youngest of all this band of adolescent poets. In fact he was, as Wordsworth called him, "a marvellous boy," for he was three months less than eighteen when, on the 25th of August, 1770, discouraged and hopeless, he put an end to his own life. His father had died three months before he was born, and he was brought up by his mother, who seems to have been almost the only person he ever truly loved. He sent her presents from London when he was almost starving himself, to lead her to suppose that he was getting on well and supporting himself comfortably. When he was eleven years old he wrote the following hymn, in praise of the Saviour:

"Almighty Framer of the skies,
O let our pure devotion rise
Like incense in Thy sight!
Wrapt in impenetrable shade,
The texture of our souls was made,
Till Thy command gave light.

"How shall we celebrate the day
When God appeared in mortal clay,
The mark of worldly scorn?
When the archangel's heavenly lays,
Attempted the Redeemer's praise,
And hailed Salvation's morn?

"A humble form the Godhead wore,
The pains of poverty He bore,
To gaudy pomp unknown.
Though in a human walk he trod,
Still was the man Almighty God,
In glory all His own."

Both in metre and religious sentiment, these verses remind us of Sir Walter Scott's lines on the setting sun, written when he was but eleven:

“Those evening clouds, that setting ray
And beauteous tint serve to display
Their great Creator’s praise.
Then let the short-lived thing called ‘man,’
Whose life’s comprised within a span,
To Him his homage raise.”

But, to return to Thomas Chatterton, it seems very singular that a boy who could write such poetry should be esteemed a dunce. So it was, however, with young Chatterton, who was taken out of the first school he was sent to, because the master could do nothing with such a stupid pupil. Afterwards he was sent to another school, and there, too, he was considered very dull; but it is altogether probable, from what we know of him afterwards, that he was concealing all this time, under an appearance of stupidity, much hard work and careful study, for one great aim of his life seems to have been to hoax people, and he evidently began his tricks in his early teens.

He did not fulfil the promise of his first poem, but became reckless and dissipated; and in his later verses he shows none of the reverence for holy things indicated by the verses quoted. When he was twelve, he finished a long poem entitled “*Elinoure and Juga*,” and when he was fifteen he began the wonderful series of impostures which for a time deceived the world. He pretended that he had found some old parchments of great literary value in a neglected chest, and these he would bring out from time to time as suited his convenience. At one time, when he was sixteen, a new bridge was finished at Bristol; he thereupon sent to a Bristol newspaper the account of the opening of the old bridge three hundred years before. This account the good people of Bristol solemnly accepted as gospel truth.

Again, he found a silly old man named Burgum, who made pewter dishes, and who was very desirous to have a long pedigree and a coat of arms; so young Chatterton went to work and made up heraldic honors to suit him, tracing his lineage back to an ancient Norman family, named De Bergham.

For theologians, he would invent ancient sermons; for wealthy citizens, he would write poems which he claimed were composed by their ancestors hundreds of years before; and, to antiquarians, he would send accounts of ancient buildings as they looked when first completed. One of his most daring forgeries was an account

of the eminent "Carvellers and Peyncters" of Bristol, which he sent to Sir Horace Walpole, who was then writing a history of British painters. The pitcher went once too often to the well, however; for Walpole, though at first deceived, submitted the manuscripts to two good judges of ancient literature, who at once pronounced them forgeries. Nevertheless, they were all very cleverly done, and it was only an expert who would suspect that they were not genuine. Says Sir Walter Scott, he "created the person, history and language of an ancient poet," and this he justly calls "an herculean task."

Soon after he had passed his seventeenth birthday, Chatterton went to London to engage in a literary life, having high hopes and strong confidence in himself, declaring that "he would settle the nation before he had done." But he did not succeed as he hoped; he could hardly earn enough to keep body and soul together, and yet he was so proud that, when he had eaten nothing for three days, he would not accept his landlady's invitation to dinner. He had become an infidel, too, and had no religious comfort and hope. Thus poor young Chatterton, proud, haughty, conceited, and yet stung to the quick by his lack of immediate success, could find no way out of his troubles, except by a dose of arsenic. He was buried in a pauper's grave near London.

A favorite hymn found in almost all Protestant collections begins:

"When, marshalled on the nightly plain,
The glittering host bestuds the sky,
One star alone, of all the train,
Can fix the sinner's wandering eye.
Hark! hark! to God the chorus breaks,
From every host, from every gem;
But one alone the Saviour speaks,
It is the 'star of Bethlehem.'"

Its author, Henry Kirke White, may be reckoned as the youngest of all hymn-writers, for he died but a few days after attaining his majority. To be sure, Joseph Grigg, a lad only ten years old, is said to have written the familiar hymn beginning:

"Jesus! and shall it ever be
A mortal man ashamed of Thee?
Ashamed of Thee whom angels praise,
Whose glories shine through endless days!"

Yet, with one exception, these were the only lines which he wrote that have lived; while White not only wrote a number of beautiful hymns which are found in nearly all the collections, but much other poetry of a high order. White's father was a butcher, who apprenticed his son to a stocking-weaver when he was only fourteen years old. The brilliant boy disliked the idea of "shining and folding up stockings for seven years," so he set out to be a scholar, quietly and by himself at first, but he made such remarkable progress that his friends exerted themselves to procure for him a university education; and very soon after entering he stood the first man of the year. When he was but seventeen he published a volume of poems of which the following, "To an Early Primrose," is a specimen:

"Mild offspring of a dark and sullen sire!
Whose modest form, so delicately fine,
Was nursed in whirling storms,
And cradled in the winds!

"Thee, when young Spring first questioned Winter's sway,
And bared the sturdy blusterer to the fight,
Thee, on this bank he threw,
To mark his victory.

"In this low vale, the promise of the year,
Serene, thou openest to the ruffling gale,
Unnoticed and alone,
Thy tender elegance.

"So virtue blooms, brought out amid the storms
Of chill adversity, in some lone walk of life
She rears her head,
Obscure and unobserved;

"While every bleaching breeze that on her blows,
Chastens her spotless purity of breast,
And hardens her to bear
Serene the ills of life."

Young White, like many another ambitious boy, was not strong and well-seasoned enough to carry out the commands of his vigorous brain, and he died, lamented by all his friends, in October, 1806, when just twenty-one years and two months old.

Some years afterwards, a young American, Mr. Francis Boot of

Boston, placed a tablet to his memory in All Saints' Church in Cambridge, the inscription on which ended with these lines:

..... "Far o'er the Atlantic wave,
A wanderer came, and sought a poet's grave.
On yon low stone he saw his lonely name,
And raised this fond memorial to his fame."

One of our young bards stands in the very forefront of English poets—John Keats. He was but twenty-five when he died. He was intended for a surgeon, but he soon found that his hand was not steady enough nor his health firm enough for that profession. When he was twenty-two, his first volume of poems was published, but it received very rough handling from the reviews.

Byron called his poems "the drivelling idiotism of the mannikin," though he afterwards praised Keats as strongly as he at first condemned him. Some writers say that these bitter criticisms dreadfully hurt the young poet's sensitive nature, and in part brought on the consumptive decline and hemorrhage of the lungs, from which he so early died. Byron refers to this idea when he says in "Don Juan":

"'Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle,
Should let itself be snuffed out by an article."

Others say, however, that Keats regarded these assaults on his poetry only with contempt and indignation, and that they had no effect upon his health, that he came of a consumptive race and would have been early carried off by the family scourge had there been no hostile Croker to review his book.

In 1820, he set out for Rome with a faithful friend, hoping to regain his health, but it was too late, for on the 23rd of February, 1821, he passed away. Just before his death, he pathetically remarked that he "felt the daisies growing over him"; and he expressed a hope that, "after his death, he might be among the poets of England," a wish that has been most fully realized. He was buried in Rome, and on his tomb is the characteristic epitaph written by himself: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water." Evidently, he little dreamed of the esteem in which posterity would hold him.

Most of these young poets who achieved any distinction met

with much hostile criticism and rasping opposition from older poets and book-reviewers, but it is also true that many of them found generous friends to champion their cause. Thus Chatterton, though not, to be sure, till long after his death, found a Campbell to say that "no English poet ever equalled him at that age"; and Keats, at the time he was receiving the bitterest criticism from the "Quarterly Review," did not want a Jeffrey to say in the "Edinburgh Review" that "his poems are flushed all over with the rich lights of fancy, and it is impossible to resist the intoxication of their sweetness, or to shut our hearts to the enchantments they so lavishly present."

Among all the older poets who gave kindly encouragement to the younger, none was more generous than Southey. He was among the first to appreciate the genius of Henry Kirke White, and he also introduced to the world another young poet, Herbert Knowles by name, who died when he was but eighteen, only one year older than Chatterton. As we quote a few lines from one of his poems, let us remember that a boy of eighteen wrote them. The poem is founded on the fourth verse of the seventeenth chapter of Matthew, where the bewildered Peter says to the Saviour on the Mount of Transfiguration, "Let us make here three tabernacles":

"Methinks it is good to be here,
If thou wilt let us build—but for whom?
Nor Elias nor Moses appear;
But the shadows of eve that encompass the gloom,
The abode of the dead and the place of the tomb.

"Shall we build to Ambition? Ah, no!
Affrighted, he shrinketh away;
For see, they would pin him below
In a small narrow cave, and, begirt with cold clay,
To the meanest of reptiles a peer and a prey.

"To Riches? Alas! 'tis in vain;
Who hid, in their turns have been hid;
The treasures are squandered again;
And here in the grave are all metals forbid,
But the tinsel that shines on the dark coffin-lid."

Thus, through many stanzas, he pursues his inquiry, shall we build to Beauty, to Pride, to Mirth, to Sorrow? and thus the poem ends:

"The first tabernacle to Hope we will build,
 And look for the sleepers around us to rise!
 The second to Faith, which insures it fulfilled;
 And the third to the Lamb of the great sacrifice;
 He bequeathed us them both when he rose to the skies."

Another youthful poet who deserves mention died in the year 1800, when he was twenty-four. His name was Richard Gall, and he wrote some very pleasing Scotch songs, which were extremely popular in their day. The following, "My only Jo and Dearie, O," with its light and tripping metre, is one of the best:

"Thy cheek is o' the roses' hue,
 My only Jo and dearie, O;
 Thy neck is like the siller-dew
 Upon the banks so briery, O!
 Thy teeth are o' the ivory,
 O, sweet's the twinkle o' thine ee!
 Nae joy, nae pleasure blinks on me,
 My only Jo and dearie, O.

"When we were bairnies on yon brae,
 And youth was blinking bonny, O,
 Aft we wad daff, the lee-lang day,
 Our joys fu' sweet and mony, O;
 Aft I would chase thee o'er the lea,
 And round about the thorny tree,
 Or pu' the wild-flowers a' for thee,
 My only Jo and dearie, O.

"I hae a wish I canna tine,
 'Mang a' the cares that grieve me, O;
 I wish thou wert forever mine,
 And never mair to leave me, O;
 Nor ither worldly care wad hae,
 Till life's warm stream forgot to play,
 My only Jo and dearie, O."

Another Scotch poet who died when he was but twenty-three was Robert Nicoll. He was a political writer as well as a poet, and struck vigorous blows in the paper which he edited at Leeds for justice and liberty. The following manly verses, "We are Brethren A'," tell us, not only of his poetical gift, but of the sturdy opinions of human equality and brotherhood which he advocated bravely during his short life:

"A happy bit hame this auld world would be,
If men when they're here could make shift to agree,
And ilk said to his neighbor in cottage and ha',
'Come, gie me your hand—we are brethren a'!"

"I ken na why ane wi' anither should fight,
When to 'gree would make a' body cosie and right,
When man meets wi man, 'tis the best way ava,
To say: 'Gie me your hand—we are brethren a'!"

"My coat is a coarse ane, an' yours may be fine,
An' I maun drink water, while you may drink wine,
But we baith hae a leal heart unspotted to shaw;
Sae gie me your hand—we are brethren a'!"

"The knave ye wad scorn, the unfaithfu' deride;
Ye would stand like a rock wi' the truth on your side;
Sae would I, an' naught else would I value a straw;
Then gie me your hand—we are brethren a'."

"We love the same summer day, sunny an' fair,
Hame? Oh, how we love it, an' a' that are there!
Frae the pure air of heaven the same life we draw;
Come, gie me your hand—we are brethren a'."

"Frail, shakin' auld age will soon come o'er baith,
An' creeping along at his back will be death;
Syne into the same mither-yird we will fa':
Come, gie me your hand—we are brethren a'."

The only poet of much promise whom we find in the annals of English literature, within the last sixty years, who has died under the age of twenty-five, is David Gray, who was but twenty-three when he breathed his last. The story of his death is very pathetic. He was intensely ambitious, and started out with high hopes of gaining a great name. He was amiable, pure and upright, and made many friends who were glad to help him. But they could not ward off the approaches of consumption, and little by little he yielded to its attack. His first book of poems was in press, and it was his ardent desire to see it before he died. To please him, the first page which had been put in type was brought to him. It gratified him greatly, and he expressed himself as willing to die. The day after he had received the first proof sheet, the earthly life of this young poet came to an end. I will quote some lines,

"If it must be that I die young," that seem prophetic in view of his early death:

"If it must be, if it must be, O God!
That I die young and make no further moans;
That, underneath the unresponsive sod,
In unescutcheoned privacy, my bones
Shall crumble soon—then give me strength to bear
The last convulsive throes of too sweet breath!
I tremble, from the edge of life, to dare
The dark and fatal leap, having no faith,
No glorious yearning for the Apocalypse;
But, like a child that in the nighttime cries
For light, I cry; forgetting the eclipse
Of knowledge and our human destinies.
O peevish and uncertain soul, obey
The law of life in patience till the day!"

The last half-century has been singularly barren in the production of young poets, or at least of poets who have died young. Whether it is that the divine afflatus is not bestowed as early as formerly, or that the modern poet takes better care of himself than his brother of the olden time, and, living to a good old age, eclipses the work of his boyhood by the superior merit of his later productions, we will not undertake to decide.

This article does not pretend to be an exhaustive account of youthful poets. If we should enlarge its self-imposed limits to include poems written by the young men and women who afterwards lived to middle life or old age, we should find it a most interesting story, but too vast for the moderate proportions of a REVIEW article. Many of our greatest bards have "lipped in numbers, because the numbers came." Neither have we attempted to trace the poetic flights of many obscure poets whose early swan-song has been heard by an admiring group of personal friends and relations, but not by the world at large. The poets' corners of country newspapers undoubtedly entomb a multitude of youthful but not inglorious Miltons; and, very likely, every reader would like to add one more adolescent bard to this list, but it is already long enough to make clear one or two points that will strike most readers with surprise. One is the serious cast of the youthful mind. Scarcely anything that is humorous, comparatively little that is heroic, almost nothing that is tragic do we

find in their writings, but largely their works consist of descriptions of natural scenes, or praise of abstract virtues, or the amplification of the religious impressions they had gained at their mothers' knees. Even light and tripping love-songs, which you would expect from them, they have largely left to their elders. The supposed sparkle and effervescence of young life are usually absent, and the shadow of the Unseen seems to be all about them. Perhaps this may be attributed in part to their early decline in health. Many of them had already entered the Valley of the Shadow, and their poems reflected the seriousness of ill-health and approaching death.

But not in this way alone can this characteristic of youthful poets be accounted for. There is a vein of earnest purpose running through most young lives, and those who have the poet's gift of expression simply speak for the race of youth, or, rather, the youth of the race. The boy often lacks the sense of humor which the man develops. He has not perhaps found out how necessary it is in rounding off the sharp corners of life. The young man or woman is seldom a wit. That gift, if it comes at all, is a development of later years. Our brilliant after-dinner speakers have, for the most part, left their 'teens far behind them. The "boy orator" is usually serious, earnest, strenuous. The boy poet is not different.

The strong religious cast of the youthful poet's mind is also very noticeable. The heaven that lies around his infancy is still his poetic vision. He has not learned the raillery and the cynicism which often give an unholy spice to the work of his older comrade.

N. P. Willis, when asked in his later life to write a poem for a religious occasion, sadly replied that he could not do it; that such efforts belonged to his youth and were not the gift of his later and lesser years. The annals of poetry, as well as of war and business and scholarship and statesmanship, teach us that not in vain will the world look to its youth for leadership in all things strong and heroic; that, however old age may deteriorate and trifle, the young man who has leadership in his veins can be counted on for high purpose and strenuous endeavor.

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